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PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHMN #0980/01 2891911
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 161911Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6412
INFO RUCNMR/MERCOSUR COLLECTIVE
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC
RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHINGTON DC

UNCLAS MONTEVIDEO 000980

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BUENOS AIRES FOR USDA AND ESTH (ASCHANDLBAUER)

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [EAGR](#) [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [TBIO](#) [UY](#)
SUBJECT: BIOTECH CONFERENCE HITS THE MARK

REF: A. STATE 233448

1B. MONTEVIDEO 206

11. (U) Summary: Post thanks EB and IIP for their assistance (ref A), which allowed Post to present a timely and well-targeted biotechnology seminar in Uruguay. A broad cross-section of key biotech decision makers attended the seminar October 12, and the conference achieved positive results. Speakers' presentations precisely met Uruguay's needs for information and addressed key issues which hinder additional legislation favorable to biotechnology in Uruguay. In addition to targeting decision makers whom we believe were positively influenced, the conference enjoyed considerable media coverage. End Summary.

RIGHT MESSAGE FOR THE RIGHT AUDIENCE

12. (U) Uruguay has traditionally supported the use of biotechnology, but this policy has been called into question under the new left-leaning Frente Amplio government (ref B). The new government created a committee to review all biotech activities and submit its recommendations to the GOU. These decision makers and the constituencies they represent were the target of this conference. Twenty five key decision makers attended. The most significant objections to the use of biotechnology in Uruguay arise from its affinity for arguments presented by European consumer organizations. Uruguayans are very concerned about food safety, especially for children, and express a strong attraction for "natural" products. Uruguay proudly labels many of its products as "Uruguay Natural," well-known slogan designed to suggest quality. Uruguayans generally do not trust government regulation of biotechnology, and may perceive Americans to be too trusting of our regulatory agencies.

13. (U) The speakers, Dr. Wayne Parrott of the University of Georgia and Susan Bond of the International Food Information Council, gave decision makers key information and rebutted these significant objections. Parrott scientifically demonstrated that plant-cross breeding has produced significantly greater diversity between plants than genetic manipulation and argued that biotechnology is a natural process. Bond addressed the advantages and perceived disadvantages of biotechnology. She listed benefits such as the reduction of pesticide use, reduction in micro-toxins left in foods by pests, and biotechnology's potential to alleviate world hunger. Finally, Parrott explained U.S. agencies' thorough processes of transparent testing and regulation of new biotech crops and pointed out the

difficulties and several inconsistencies in the European regulatory process.

RESULTS

14. (SBU) No one expects Uruguay's Committee on Biotechnology to produce its recommendations in the near future, so we will not know the concrete effect of the seminar for some time. However, there are some indications that the seminar was quite effective. A meat-producers' representative expressed his doubts before the conference that Uruguayan "natural" beef could still be designated as such if the cows were fed genetically modified plants, but after the conference, he invited Dr. Parrott to speak to his association. The conference directly but respectfully addressed key Uruguayan concerns, and as the seminar progressed, the tone of the questions became more friendly. Half of the decision-making bodies on the Committee had representatives present at the conference.

15. (U) Three television stations covered the event, one of which covers the rural areas. One radio station ran an extended interview with Dr. Parrott. The coverage was neutral to positive. Two magazines that interviewed the speakers are working toward publication of the articles.

COMMENT--BEST PRACTICES

16. (SBU) Post was pleasantly surprised by the level of interest in the conference. In the past, we have been extremely cautious to keep USG fingerprints off conferences of this type, fearing that we would scare away participants who do not already agree with the USG position. This excessive caution interfered with our first attempt to stage this conference. While we did not overtly display USG sponsorship of the event, expediency required that the Embassy directly invite all participants. Participants were drawn by the quality of the speakers and the expectation of learning something new. We made it easy to ignore USG sponsorship; we held the event in a hotel not frequently used for Embassy activities and had no obvious symbols of sponsorship at the event. Finally, we believe the audience was attracted to the message in part because speakers presented both sides of the controversy. One participant told Ms. Bond that he appreciated her presentation because "so often U.S. speakers present only their side (of the argument)." Both Parrott and Bond compellingly presented the case for using biotechnology, but participants were also engaged by the speakers' demonstrated understanding of both sides of the question. END COMMENT.

Gonzalez